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U.S. Tests Support for Power-Sharing Plan

By Don Oberdorfer
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Reagan administration has been quietly sounding out South African black leaders, including officials of the outlawed African National Congress, on a plan for multiracial power-sharing that recently emerged from a group of South African moderates.

Undersecretary Michael H. Armacost, the third-ranking official of the State Department, said in an interview that he broached the "Indaba proposal" for political power sharing among the races in a Dec. 20 meeting with three senior ANC officials in Lusaka, Zambia.

Armacost said Secretary of State George P. Shultz is likely to take up the same topic when he holds a meeting planned for late this month in Washington with ANC President Oliver Tambo.

The Armacost and Shultz meetings with ANC leaders have been described as giving greater U.S. recognition to the main guerrilla force seeking the overthrow of the South African government. The meetings have been justified by the State Department as attempts to encourage peaceful solutions and dialogue in South Africa.

Armacost said he told the three ANC representatives last month that Washington regards the Indaba plan as "a rather interesting proposal . . . which establishes a precedent of one man, one vote while providing other assurances that the rights of minorities would be respected."

He said "both the good will that is evident in the general approach and the assurances contained in details" of the Indaba plan are essential to overcome "a gulf of mistrust" between blacks and whites in South Africa.

While declining to be specific about the ANC response, Armacost said that in general terms "they didn't seem too enthusiastic." He said the ANC leaders seemed to fear that the plan could produce a situation similar to that of the Bantustan homelands policy, which has been used to perpetuate apartheid.

South African Home Affairs Minister Stoffel Botha has rejected the Indaba proposal in his capacity as leader of the ruling National Party in the province of Natal, where the plan originated, saying such a one-man, one-vote system would lead to the "total domination" of whites by

the black majority. The South African government has not yet taken an official position on the proposal, however.

Indaba, which is the Zulu word for meeting, was the term given to a convention of multiracial representatives of 36 moderate groups in Natal province. After eight months of work, in which the ANC and other militant organizations refused to participate, the Indaba recommended on Nov. 28 a draft constitution that would provide black majority rule through elections based on universal adult suffrage. It also would provide major legislative representation and veto rights for whites.

Shultz, in a policy speech Dec. 4, called the Indaba proposal "controversial in South Africa, as any imaginative compromise might be." He added that "the Indaba has shown that South Africans are capable of difficult mutual accommodation to advance the cause of racial justice and representative government when they are challenged to do so."

The current U.S. posture toward the plan, as Shultz's remarks suggest, is to commend the concept of such a negotiated and balanced solution to South Africa's racial problems while steering clear of endorsing

ing the particular details of the Indaba proposal.

Armacost said he undertook discussions with ANC leaders during his recent visit to southern Africa because "the ANC is obviously a player" in South Africa.

"If there is a dialogue or negotiation [as the United States has recommended], there has got to be some sharing of a vision of the future which is multiracial," he added. Other State Department officials said part of the objective of Armacost and Shultz in their ANC talks is to press the multifaceted, umbrella group to come up with its own "vision of the future" as well as policies for achieving it.

"We have tried to be fairly clear about what the South African government ought to do," Armacost said, mentioning the release of ANC leader Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners, an end to the state of emergency and a timetable for ending apartheid.

"There is also a responsibility on the part of the black community to spell out their own concept of a future for South Africa that can appeal across racial lines and provide a basis for serious negotiations," he added.